



BOOK
OF THE
ELDER
WISDOM

AS TOLD TO
R. WALTER DUTTON

Book of the Elder Wisdom

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Pasadena, California, May 16, 1984	1
Chapter 2 Encino, California, May 18, 1984.....	10
Chapter 3 Burbank, California, May 24, 1984.....	13
Chapter 4 Hollywood, California, May 25, 1984	17
Chapter 5 Echo Park, California, May 26, 1984.....	20
Chapter 6 Hollywood, California, May 26, 1984	25
Chapter 7 Skid Row, Los Angeles, May 27, 1984	29
Chapter 8 Skid Row, Los Angeles, May 29, 1984	34
Chapter 9 Hollywood, California, May 29, 1984	37
Chapter 10 Echo Park, California, May 31, 1984	42
Chapter 11 Downtown Los Angeles, June 1, 1984	48
Chapter 12 Downtown Los Angeles, June 4, 1984	54
Chapter 13 Skid Row, Los Angeles, June 7, 1984.....	57
Chapter 14 Stillwater, New Mexico, June 11, 1984.....	60
Chapter 15 Colorado Plateau of New Mexico, June 12, 1984	62
Chapter 16 Pasadena, California, June 14, 1984.....	65
Chapter 17 The Colorado Plateau, Date Unknown.....	70
Chapter 18 The Colorado Plateau, A Later Date	77
Chapter 19 Location Uncertain, Date Unknown.....	82
Chapter 20 Great Portal Complex, Carboniferous Period of the Palaeozoic Era	91
Chapter 21 Location Uncertain, Date Unknown.....	96
Chapter 22 Pasadena, California, June 15, 1984.....	98
Chapter 23 Washington, D.C., June 18, 1984.....	106
Chapter 24 Washington, D.C., June 18, 1984.....	111
Chapter 25 Washington, D.C., June 21, 1984.....	114
Chapter 26 Secret Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, June 22, 1984	123
Chapter 27 Resort Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, June 25, 1984	126
Chapter 28 Secret Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, July 9, 1984	131
Chapter 29 Secret Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, July 9, 1984	135
Chapter 30 Secret Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, July 10, 1984.....	138
Chapter 31 Secret Facility of the Church of the Elder Wisdom, July 10, 1984.....	143
Chapter 32 Greater Washington, D.C. Area, July 11, 1984.....	147
Chapter 33 Greater Washington, D.C. Area, July 13, 1984.....	151
Chapter 34 Greater Washington, D.C. Area, July 26, 1984.....	154
Chapter 35 The White House, July 27, 1984	158
Chapter 36 Camarillo State Mental Hospital, August 20, 1984.....	167

That is not dead
which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons
even death may die.

– H.P.L.

Chapter 1

Pasadena, California

May 16, 1984

“Can the living be governed by that which is dead?”

My guest seemed taken aback by my question.

“What, exactly, do you mean?” he replied, watching me carefully. “Which living – and which dead?”

I had to laugh a little at his concern. He was a loyal friend, but perhaps somewhat overanxious on my account. Good old Phil! Still, there was an element, at least, of something genuine in my jokingly ominous words. And after all, there was always this: that he did put up with me...

“It’s that distant relation of mine,” I said. “The one I told you about. The writer. Gone these many years, but ... I do think about him, from time to time. In fact, lately I’ve been thinking about him constantly.” I almost laughed again at Phil’s expression, but managed to refrain.

“As I said,” I went on, “we weren’t closely related, but I’ve been told there’s an amazing physical resemblance. That’s what caught my interest in the beginning. And more than that, I’ve since found out, a similarity of personality. The same preoccupation with the past, and a strange fascination – combined with revulsion – for the alien. The weird.”

“Come on, that doesn’t mean—” began my friend, but I cut him short.

“I know. I don’t take it all that seriously. Still, it’s interesting, you’ve got to admit. And it does have something to do with why I’ve called you over here – something quite weird.”

“Well, I didn’t think such a private person...”

“You mean ‘recluse’ – I know very well what I am.”

“...would have called me over just to have a game of chess. So, what’s this all about?”

I stopped for a moment to collect my thoughts; the clock on the mantelpiece ticked on in its quiet way. I knew that what I had to say must be presented carefully.

“We’ve known each other since we were at school, so you’re aware that while my interests may be esoteric – well off the beaten track, so to speak – they are always approached in a thoroughly rational manner. Indeed, I was glad to be able to provide some information that helped you with that last case of yours. But now, I’m afraid that I may need some help myself – in your professional capacity.”

“Okay,” said Phil, “but are you sure you need a private investigator? Not the police? I know some pretty decent ones I could put you in touch with. The kind of stuff I handle usually comes from where the law starts fading at the margins...”

“Of course. But what I’m dealing with may be at the margins too, though not always where the law is concerned. Have you ever heard of the Anasazi?”

“The what?”

“The Anasazi – derived from the Navajo word for the ‘old ones’, or perhaps more accurately, the ‘old enemies’. I believe the Hopi, who may be their descendants, call them the Hisatsinom. In any event, they were a people who lived in the American southwest for more than two thousand years, but were gone before Europeans arrived. Perhaps you’ve heard of the cliff dwellers?”

“Yes, I’ve seen pictures – in Arizona or something? Towns built high up under cliffs?”

“That’s right. Though the territory of the Anasazi extended across parts of Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico, as well as Arizona – and their most populous settlements weren’t cliff dwellings, but monumental pueblo cities. In Chaco Canyon, at one time the center of their civilization, the largest buildings, the ‘great houses’, covered up to two acres and were several stories high. The massive constructions and ritual avenues in that place were carefully aligned to the stars. But after a time all these lands, without exception, were completely abandoned. Which is the strangest part of the story of the Anasazi: their disappearance.”

Phil nodded. “So, now we get to the part that’s really up your alley – the great mystery.”

“Yes. Not only did they suddenly leave their settlements, which often were still in perfect condition, but in certain cases there is

evidence of things yet more sinister: internecine warfare, huge massacres, mutilations, even cannibalism. Many of the cliff dwellings were built late in the history of the Anasazi, evidently for defensive purposes, but eventually even these were abandoned. In other words, something went very wrong, something that caused a catastrophe and a massive final flight. My interest is in that ... something.”

“All very fascinating, I grant you, but where, exactly, would a P.I. come in? I don’t get that part. It sounds more like you need an archaeologist.”

“Funny you should mention that. Though I am a dedicated amateur, I could perhaps use some professional assistance in the archaeological field; except for certain reasons that rule it out for the present. At any rate, over the years my interests have led me to make some personal investigations of Anasazi ruins. As I am only a hobbyist, these activities are not, technically speaking, completely legitimate. However, I make as little disturbance as possible; I do not dig; I take nothing away. I am certainly not a looter. I only wish to see. But what I saw on my last outing...”

At this point I could not refrain from a slight shudder. I knew Phil couldn’t help but notice; yet for now, at least, he said nothing.

“It was something I found at a very remote location, where ruins of an Anasazi settlement had only lately been discovered. It was quite an expedition to get there. While taking an initial hike around the outlying area, before visiting the ruins proper, I happened to stumble on a half-hidden little side canyon, a secluded place that seemed as if it might be of interest. At first I thought that what I found there might not have been visited since it was abandoned centuries ago – but that proved not to be the case.

“What I discovered in the canyon was a round stone tower, which appeared to be three stories high. It had no windows, not even the narrow slits sometimes seen; only a low doorway. I was able to enter without difficulty.

“Switching on my flashlight as I made my way inside, I found I was in a large room which took up the entire ground floor. Following the circular wall was a stone ramp that gradually spiraled up to the level above – most unusual for the Anasazi, who nor-

mally would have simply employed a wooden ladder. In the center of the room was a very large hearth, with a corresponding smoke hole in the ceiling above. The blackened remains of the last fire that had been made were still present. Of course I examined these, though perhaps now I wish I hadn't.

"Among the ashes in the hearth were bones – which, upon further investigation, appeared to be human bones. Some had been split open, evidently to get at the marrow. I almost became sick at this gruesome sight, and in fact quickly left the tower, to stand outside in the open air for a few minutes. After I had calmed a bit and regained my nerve I re-entered the place; after all, I had gone to quite a bit of trouble to get there, and this was an amazing find. However, this time I carefully avoided the central hearth, and instead began ascending the ramp that led to the floor above.

"The timbers supporting the second floor were very heavy and seemed to be in surprisingly good condition, so I decided it would be safe to trust my weight to them. This level turned out to be quite empty, except for some kind of markings on the plastered wall, which proved to be of two different types. First, there were pictographs created by the Anasazi – these were stylized but highly artistic; in fact I would call them haunting, creating the impression of a force of magical power. They depicted a long line of what were evidently human figures, perhaps performing a ceremony or dance, that were arrayed on either side of one central figure. This central form was very large and very strange, for it appeared to exhibit something like tentacles or emanations of power, which waved about it – it may have been meant to be a shaman in ritual costume or even a god. Beneath it were several human figures that were laid out horizontally, their heads separated from their bodies.

"The second type of markings on the wall truly shocked me. For they were characters of the modern Roman alphabet, appearing both above and below the Anasazi pictographs, in two continuous lines that completely encircled the room. The words they formed were not English or any language I could recognize. However, they did not appear to be graffiti, at least not in any usual sense; their age was not apparent. I of course recorded

them in the notebook I always carry with me on my outings, which took some little time, and I also made drawings of the pictographs as best I could.

“At this point I was baffled, scarcely knowing what next to expect. You also might well imagine the effect that these discoveries had on my composure, there in the shadows of the ancient tower. What else might lie within it, hidden in the darkness, waiting over the long years? A strange thought, but natural enough for the frail human psyche. After I eventually steadied myself, I returned to the ramp to continue my ascent.

“As I entered the third level it turned out to be roofless, open to the sky; the sheer walls of the narrow canyon in which the tower was situated soared high above, shrouding all below them in a twilit gloom. My first surprise was the condition of the floor – composed of some type of hard plaster that was not only in almost pristine condition, but free of the dust and debris of centuries. How could it have survived in such a state? As I was attempting to digest this, I noticed dark lines marked on the floor, which clearly formed a geometric pattern. It turned out to be something like a pentagram, extending across the whole width of the area, with the tower’s central smoke hole in its middle.

“At this my mind reeled, for I suddenly had a vision: of smoke rising from unspeakable charnel fires below, emerging through the pentagram to go climbing into the sky. An offering, but to who, or what? It was then that something caught my eye, an object lying across from me on the other side of the floor, right up against the wall.

“I walked over, and it turned out to be a backpack. Yes, a modern backpack. And splashed across its surface were stains that suspiciously resembled dried blood.

“I gingerly opened the backpack, carefully avoiding the stains, and briefly rummaged through its contents. I found only the sort of items a hiker might normally have been carrying, with the exception of an object that fell out of the pocket of a shirt. It was an employee’s identity card.

“Somehow, this was the final straw. I’d had enough, more than my nerves could handle. The things I had found in the tower were bizarre, incomprehensible, and moreover the place had ac-

quired an aspect of utter malevolence. Taking the backpack with me, I made my way back down the stairs.

“As I passed by the blackened hearth on the ground floor, a thought happened to occur to me: just how old were the burnt remains within it? How old could they really be? I had no way of telling at the time, absolutely no way. So perhaps they were not centuries old after all...”

“As you might imagine, I lost no time in getting away from that place. After returning home I made a few inquiries, and then got in touch with you. So here we are.”

At this point I leaned over to pick up a plastic bin that was next to my chair, set it in front of Phil, and opened it. Inside was the backpack I had found in the tower.

My friend took the item and inspected it himself, going through its contents just as I had done. “Well, you were right,” he said, “I don’t see anything unusual here, with the possible exception of the stains on the outside. Do you have that card you found?”

I handed him the ID card, which had been issued to one Jared Palmer by the Dynatomics Corporation. It listed his social security and employee identification numbers, but displayed no photograph. Phil considered the card for a few moments without comment. “As for the stains,” I said, “I made some simple tests and found they were indeed blood, but I don’t have the equipment or training to take it much further.”

Phil shook his head. “This looks more and more like it should be a police matter. I don’t see why you haven’t contacted them.”

“Well, there are some other things I’ve found out. As I said, I made some inquiries after I returned home. Though the writing in the tower wasn’t in any language I knew, as I studied it some of the words eventually seemed to strike a familiar chord. It was maddening, because for some time I couldn’t bring to mind the connection; but then I happened to think of that writer relative of mine, who I mentioned earlier. I’d read a few of his stories, and it occurred to me that there might be some similarity to the strange chants and formulas that often appeared in them. With a little study, I found there was! So I began to read more of his work, seeking out everything he’d written, at least as much as I could

find. As a result, I've been able to decipher some of the meaning of the writing. Not all of it by any means, but enough to get a general impression of what it's trying to convey.

"It seems to be a kind of invocation, a call for the intervention of entities of great power, who are inactive or 'sleeping' now, as the writing puts it, but will soon make their presence known. A strange business. But just as strange is the connection with the stories of my relation – how could it have come about?"

"The likeliest explanation would seem to be that someone familiar with the stories took the liberty of adding the writing and pentagram to the Anasazi tower, either as a joke or in the demented belief that the stories were not fiction. Though as a joke such an effort would seem pointless, considering the remoteness of the location and the obscurity of the subject. So it would appear it must be taken seriously.

"That's why I'm asking for your help. There is clearly something very odd about this whole matter, but perhaps also very important. Whoever is involved knew enough about the Anasazi to find the tower, and was determined enough to make some fairly elaborate additions to it, as well as perhaps committing more horrible deeds. If the authorities are brought in at this point I'm afraid they will just go clumping about and muddy the waters, settle for what is most obvious, and lose the chance to discover what's ultimately behind all this. They will not grasp the full implications of whatever is going on.

"Then again, if you don't immediately make headway with your own efforts, or happen to discover something that calls for prompt intervention, you can always summon the police anyway. That of course is your prerogative. I only need a little time."

"Assuming I accept all that," said Phil, "just what do you want me to do?"

"To begin with, have the stains on the backpack analyzed privately, to determine if they are human in origin. I'm sure you would know how to have this done in a confidential manner. Also, find out what you can about the owner of the identity card. Obviously, it is a crucial lead to whatever is going on."

Phil sighed, and shook his head again. "Jeez Louise. Well, okay. Since you haven't reported any of this yet, a little more delay isn't

going to make much difference. I'll find out what I can. But the minute I bump into something that's definitely criminal, I'll have to go to the police. At least you seem to realize that much."

"Also, besides your expenses, including the blood test," I said, "I will of course be happy to pay your usual fee, which—"

"Forget it," said Phil, putting up his hand. "Expenses, fine, but the fee, no go. You've helped me with a few things in my work – in school too, as I happen to remember. This will just go toward balancing the books. Or call it professional courtesy, if you like. Anyway, I expect this dizzy affair will pay off in sheer entertainment, if nothing else."

Two days later Phil gave me a call. "A couple of things to report," he said. "First, the blood on the backpack is human, and type 'O', the commonest kind. Second, I paid a visit to the Dynatomics Corporation, at its office in Canoga Park, and found that Jared Palmer doesn't work there anymore. However, I managed to wheedle his current address out of them – I used a card identifying me as an investigator for an insurance company, which actually did employ me at one time. The address turned out to be for a little house in Encino.

"A knock on the door produced Mr. Palmer himself, who was apparently very much alive, in fact quite healthy. I presented him with the backpack, which I said a friend had found while hiking, but didn't mention just how and where it had been discovered. He was surprised at its return, but not overly so, and volunteered that it had been lost at a campsite up around Big Bear – he assumed it had been stolen. When I casually referred to the stains, he laughed, and said it was the result of the nosebleeds he has from time to time, especially at higher altitudes. He thanked me for bringing back his property, and that was that. Or so it seemed.

"Later on, something about Mr. Palmer started bothering me a little. Not much, but somehow he seemed just a bit too smooth, too plausible. I went back to Dynatomics, and finally managed to get a description of Palmer out of their receptionist. It turned out that their former employee was short, dark-haired, overweight, and a socially inept loner – whereas the individual in the house in

Encino was tall, blonde, athletic, and very, very glib. So unless our Jared has undergone a startling transformation, somebody out there has been impersonating him.

“Oh, and one more thing. Whoever it was that I met at the house is no longer to be found there. So you might want to come out here to Encino.”

Chapter 2

Encino, California

May 18, 1984

After jotting down the address that Phil gave me, I hurriedly drove over to Jared Palmer's house, where we met in the living room.

“Still no sign of Mr. Palmer, in either ersatz or genuine versions,” said Phil. “After getting the contradictory description of our friend, I came back here right away. This time there was no answer when I knocked on the front door, and finding it unlocked, let myself in. Naturally I took the opportunity to poke around. A stack of unopened mail, among other things, indicated no one has actually lived in the place for at least a couple of weeks, though the expected kind of personal possessions and clothes were still here. It may be that I met the impersonator by accident, when he just happened to be on the premises – if so, he's a pretty cool customer, stringing me along like he did. Anyway, I thought you might want to take a look around the place yourself. You might find something that I wouldn't recognize as significant.”

Yes, I did indeed want to take a look around Jared Palmer's house. It wasn't very large – two small bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and bathroom, probably built in the twenties or thirties. One of the bedrooms served as a study cum library, and it was here that I concentrated my efforts. Palmer had a large collection of science fiction, fantasy, and horror books, including quite a number authored by my writer relation, but there was nothing special about the placement or condition of these latter; no notes inserted between the leaves or annotations in the margins. The drawers of his desk also yielded nothing of interest. However, on the desktop itself was a neat stack of papers. These proved to be 24 identical copies of some type of newsletter, authored by Palmer himself, consisting of three photocopied sheets stapled together. The subject was the literature of my relative, dealt with in knowledgeable detail.

Also on the desk was a large manila envelope, addressed to Jared Palmer, which contained an earlier copy of his own newsletter, plus 23 copies of assorted and sundry newsletters of other authors. I had heard of this sort of thing; it was evidently from an amateur press association. Each member of the association (evidently 24 in number in this instance) would send in sufficient copies of his own newsletter (or so-called “zine”) to a central mailer, who would then re-sort and collate these submissions into bundles, each bundle containing one copy of every different newsletter. These collated bundles would then be sent out to the members, so everyone received a copy of everyone else’s “zine”.

My relation had himself been a member of an amateur press association many years before, but this was apparently an entirely different one. All the newsletters touched on the topic of my relative’s writing to some extent, however tangentially, so this was evidently the pertinent subject for the group. However, there was also a great deal of commentary on extraneous matters, as well as personal communications amongst the membership. I was disappointed to find nothing that bore on the disappearance of Mr. Palmer, or anything having to do with the Anasazi or the archaeology of the American southwest.

There were a couple of cardboard file boxes stacked beside the desk that held a number of earlier issues from the press association, and I decided to take these back with me to Pasadena, where they could be studied at leisure. On the desktop I also found several bulletins from a science fiction club, which had a meeting hall at a location not far distant.

Neither Phil nor I could find anything else in the house that shed any light on what might have happened to Jared Palmer. Or, for that matter, on who the impostor might have been, or the reason for his presence.

“There might have been something here that the phoney Jared wanted, and he simply made off with it after I left,” said Phil, as we took one last look around the living room. “I could really kick myself for not spotting him as a fake, especially since he got away with that backpack. Of course I wanted to see his reaction to it, but now we have no proof, nothing to show the cops.”

“Well,” I replied, “we did obtain some useful information – I will examine the amateur press newsletters in detail, which will also provide us with contact information for Palmer’s correspondents. There is also the science fiction club, with which he apparently had some kind of connection.”

Phil nodded. “Yeah, that club. Do you think you could pay a visit to it, see what what’s going on there? Somehow I think you’d fit in a lot better in that place than I would.” Was that a ghost of smile that I spied as he said this? “On my end,” he continued, “I think I’ll go back to the Dynatomics Corporation to see what I can dig up. After we got acquainted their receptionist seemed to get along pretty well with me. And as for the police, I guess the best that can be done at this point is to call in an anonymous tip that Mr. Palmer has disappeared. There’s a chance they might be able to turn up something, and the guy’s landlord, if no one else, is going to miss him pretty soon.”

With that we left the house of Jared Palmer. As I approached my car I found something on the windshield, which turned out to be a flyer, crudely printed on cheap paper. It read: “You Are Under Observation – Powerful Forces See All – You Too Can Stand Among the Elect – You Too Can Know the Secret Power – In the Church of the Elder Wisdom.”

By the time I finished reading, Phil was already gone. But strange religious sects were hardly a novelty in Southern California, and the flyer was clearly of little importance.

Chapter 3

Burbank, California

May 24, 1984

On the following Thursday I attended the next scheduled meeting of the Valley Science Fiction Society, located in Burbank, in which Jared Palmer evidently had a membership. In the meantime I'd read over all the publications of the amateur press association that I had taken home with me; but though I gained some interesting insights on the writings of my late relation, there was once again nothing to throw any light on the disappearance of Mr. Palmer. Indeed, he remained something of an enigma. Unlike other members of the association, who chatted in print about everyday events and their personal affairs, Jared Palmer never did, concentrating solely on the literature of the subject at hand. As for my friend Phil, he had other cases to attend to at his detective agency, but nevertheless promised to continue his investigation at Palmer's workplace, as time allowed.

I arrived somewhat early for the society's meeting, at 7:30 PM, so that I might have an opportunity to look the situation over first. At the front of the property was a small house, which had been turned into a library and lounge, and in the back was the meeting hall proper. A few groups of people stood talking in front of the hall, and as I approached I noticed that I drew a couple of pointed stares. I put these down as reactions to a stranger, though it did seem a bit odd.

The meeting hall had evidently had a former existence as a large garage or old industrial building of some kind. The interior walls were clad throughout in imitation wood grain paneling, and mounted among exposed joists in the ceiling were ventilation ducts with shiny wrappings of insulation. Several dozen folding chairs provided seating. In all, distinctly utilitarian, but serviceable.

A pleasant lady, seated by a table at the door, spotted me as a new visitor as I entered the hall, and had me fill out an information card, after which I was handed a fact sheet on the club. I took a seat among the dozen or so attendees already present, and

noticed that a gentleman was mounting a film reel on a 16mm projector in the aisle. Thereupon followed the showing of an episode of an old movie serial, which featured an individual who zoomed about the sky by means of rocket jet-pack, fighting crime during earthbound intervals. I couldn't quite grasp the logic of this, as more familiar forms of transportation would no doubt have been sufficient for his purposes, while someone flying high in the air would seem to constitute an excellent target.

When the film ended more people began filtering in to take their seats in the hall, after which the club's meeting commenced. First the minutes of the previous meeting were read, followed by a sometimes heated discussion of new business, the abstruse details of which generally baffled me. Then a fellow stepped up to the front of the room to deliver some sort of talk or report, which again I couldn't quite follow; but perhaps that was also true for the rest of the audience, because after a while calls of "boring ... borrrring" began to issue from among the crowd. Eventually the luckless speaker returned to his seat.

An auction of various items, mostly books and periodicals, then took place. As this did not particularly interest me, I took the opportunity to get up and make my way back to the lady at the table by the door. There I inquired about the presence of one Don Delaporte, a member of Palmer's amateur press association who also attended meetings of the club, according to information in the association's newsletters. He had not been seen in the hall, but I was advised to try the front building, as he could often be found in the library there.

Luck was with me, as the only occupant of the library (aside from the librarian) was indeed Mr. Delaporte. He turned around from a bookshelf as I spoke his name, and proved to be an individual of medium height, dressed in a black T-shirt and dark slacks, his features framed with a close-trimmed red beard and surmounted by a jaunty, black and white checked tam o'shanter. As I introduced myself he stared, openmouthed; but I pressed on, explaining about my writer relation, and my interest in the press association. At this he became animated – or dare I say re-animated – and excitedly shook my hand.

“The resemblance to him is amazing – an actual relative!” exclaimed Delaporte. “I’m honored to meet you!” I suddenly realized why my presence had drawn occasional stares. “I only wish Jared was here to meet you, too!”

“Would that be Jared Palmer?” I asked. “I understand he is also a member of your group.”

“Yes he is, but unfortunately he doesn’t attend the meetings here very often. Kind of a loner, to tell you the truth, but he really knows his stuff – he’s probably the best writer among us.”

“I take it, then, that you are not closely acquainted with him?”

Delaporte shook his head. “Outside of his writings? No, I’m sorry to say. In fact, I can’t think of anyone who actually knows him well. I guess you wanted to meet him because you heard about his work? It really is very good.”

“Yes, partly,” I said – which in fact was partly true. I handed him my card. “If you could inquire with anyone else here who might have been acquainted with Jared, for the purpose of putting me in touch with him, I would greatly appreciate it. It’s actually quite important.”

“I’ll be glad to. But I imagine he’ll show up again himself, sooner or later. In the meantime, would you like to join our little group? It would be wonderful to have member who’s actually a blood relative of the author we’re all so interested in. And might have some special knowledge of him, too?”

“I’m afraid he was only a distant relation,” I replied, “who of course died years before I was born. I’m not acquainted with anyone who personally knew him, and don’t possess any papers or mementos of his. But if you would like to have me in your press association, I would be honored to join. It sounds very interesting.”

“Wonderful!” Delaporte eyed me thoughtfully. “You know, with that resemblance of yours, you could be part of a really great entry in a costume contest. I was thinking of getting one ready for the next convention...”

“Well, I’ll think about it,” I said, with a polite laugh. (Costume contest?) With that I bid farewell to Mr. Delaporte, and left for my residence in Pasadena.

Shortly after I returned home I received a phone call from Phil. “Things are starting to get stirred up enough that something might float to the top. Could you meet me tomorrow evening at my office in Hollywood, say around six o’clock? I’ve got to go now, but I’ll have more to show you then.”

I of course replied in the affirmative, while wondering what the meeting would bring.

Chapter 4

Hollywood, California

May 25, 1984

When I arrived at Phil's office, I could see it was still in the casually dingy state (or perhaps well-worn condition – some would say run-down) I had always encountered before. However, this time there was a new addition, in the form of a young woman who was seated beside the desk. I thought she might certainly have been described as pretty, with short red hair, and dressed in informal attire of a rather revealing cut.

"I would like you to meet Delia Schurtz," said Phil, as he introduced me to her. "She's the receptionist I met at Jared Palmer's workplace."

"And I'm glad to meet Phil's old friend," she said. "He's told me a lot about you."

"Not so old as to fail to appreciate meeting you," I replied, as I took her hand. I think I was favored with a slightly bemused smile as I then sat down in the chair in front of the desk.

"Anyway, Delia's been helpful," continued Phil. "In fact, very helpful. She knew Palmer to some extent – at least better than anyone else at company."

"Which is an experience I could just as well have skipped," the receptionist said. "God, what a weirdo that guy was."

"In what way?" I asked.

"It was what he was always talking about. He never really hit on me, exactly – just talked. About things that he claimed he knew, but everyone else didn't; secrets of power, supposedly, and all kinds of strange stuff. I didn't understand most of it. At first I listened because it was all so weird it was funny, and kind of pathetic. But like I told Phil, after a while I had more than enough."

"Did he ever mention the Anasazi?"

"The what?"

"Or the cliff dwellers? Chaco canyon? Archaeology of the southwest? Spirit rituals?"

"No, none of those things, at least that I remember. You're not going to turn out to be a weirdo too, are you?" She smiled as she

said this, but I thought she might also have looked at me with a new wariness.

“Why did he leave your company?”

“It was his own idea. He was actually okay at his job – he wrote up technical reports. We do a lot of industrial quality control, test out electronics for the government, things like that. He seemed to think he had something important to do, that something really big was going to happen, so he had to leave and prepare for it. In fact, he wanted to see that I was ‘saved’ too, when the big thing happened; that’s how he put it. He actually asked me to join this church he was in – the Church of the Elder Wisdom, he called it.”

“Church of ... Elder Wisdom?” I suddenly remembered the flyer I had found a week ago. “Are you sure those were his exact words?”

“How could I forget! He even gave me a card with the Church’s name and address on it, and also my name written in for ‘Initiate’, whatever that is – said it would get me in good with them. Yeah, like that would really be great, ha ha.”

“Do you still have the card? Could I see it?”

“Sure.” She fumbled a bit in her handbag and produced the item, which was just as she described. The address on it was for a location in Echo Park, on Alvarado Street.

“I’ve heard of this Church before,” I said, staring at the card. “I found a flyer for it on my car, when we left Palmer’s house.”

“That’s interesting,” observed Phil, “but I didn’t find one on mine.”

“And more interesting yet,” I went on, “there was no address on my flyer, no times listed for meetings or services.”

“What do you think it means?”

“I’ve got no idea. None at all. In fact, the more details of this business we discover, the less we seem to understand about its larger meaning. Just how many strange things was Jared Palmer involved with? And are they connected somehow?”

Phil took the card from me and looked it over himself. “At least we have another lead now. Which is fortunate, because the police aren’t doing anything for us. I phoned in a tip about Palmer’s disappearance, as I told you I would, but as of now it’s

just one more missing persons case among many. My contact in the department tells me nothing has been turned up yet, and it doesn't seem likely that anything will, not any time soon."

"What do you think should we do, then?" I asked.

Phil tapped the card on his desk. "I say use this thing. Take them up on their invitation. Why not? As long as you feel up to it, Delia. We'll be right there with you, so there shouldn't be any trouble, though you wouldn't think there could be much in a church. How about it – say tomorrow?"

"Well, okay," she said, perhaps a bit hesitantly. "I guess it's important, and it ought to be kind of interesting. In a way. But you owe me one, Phil, you really owe me one."

"For sure, kid, for sure."

"So we're going to the Empire Club again?"

"Right now, just like I told you. The best club on the strip, isn't it?"

With that we all took our leave, with Phil evidently in pursuit of his own particular line of investigation.

When I reached my car I once again found a flyer for the Church of the Elder Wisdom on the windshield, identical to the first. I looked about at other vehicles in the vicinity, but on none of them could a flyer be seen.